

The Identity Crisis in Catholic Schools

By Deacon Keith A. Fournier

Introduction

From January 28 through February 3, 2006, we observed Catholic Schools Week in the Catholic Dioceses of the United States of America. The theme for the week was, "Good News in Education". Materials were sent to every Catholic School in the United States along with offers for clothing, posters, and other self-congratulatory items. I do not believe it is a time to send up balloons. Rather, it is a time for deep soul searching concerning the state of Catholic schools; time for real honesty. It is also a time to roll up our sleeves and get to work. There is an identity crisis in many Catholic schools. My purpose in this article is to examine some of the challenges we must face and to propose that the only path to recovery is through the rediscovery and reaffirmation of the purpose, nature and mission of Catholic education.

There is much to affirm about Catholic Schools. In some Dioceses, the faithful are witnessing a true restoration and flourishing of Catholic education. However, there are too many places where that restoration is not yet occurring. I believe that it can and will, if the purpose, nature and mission of Catholic education is articulated by leaders and then our schools are properly led. We must first identify the most significant impediment to the flourishing of Catholic Schools, the roadblock to authentic progress if we truly want to move them toward the vision that the Church has so clearly and eloquently articulated in her wonderful pronouncements concerning Catholic education. Here it is, in what some may believe is "simplistic" but which I maintain is absolutely fundamental: many Catholic schools have lost their Catholic identity. They suffer from an identity crisis.

I write as a member of the Clergy, a Deacon, who is absolutely convinced that the work of training the next generation of Catholic men and women to carry on the work of the Church for the Third Christian Millennium is among the most important of the tasks that the Church faces. Without a proper education, they simply will not be adequately prepared for the challenge which has been presented to the Church of the Third Millennium, We face a culture which, particularly in the West, is left with little remnant of Christian influence. It was Alasdair McIntyre who is credited with having said: The Creed of the English is that there is no God, but it is meet and proper to pray to Him now and again". This is essentially the state of religious influence in Western culture; we live as though God does not exist while continuing to externally reference a feigned religiosity. In short, the West is now mission country and every student at a Catholic school is a future missionary.

I write as an educator. I currently teach at a Catholic school while I serve a parish and pursue a PhD in Moral Theology. I have chaired or served on school boards and have held academic and administrative positions, including that of a College Dean at a Catholic College. Even more importantly, I am a Catholic father who has had the experience of raising children in the first Catholic school, the domestic church of the Christian family, and my wife and I have had a mixed experience during the childrearing years in finding Catholic Schools that truly understood and lived the mission of the Catholic Church in a way that would make the tuition worth spending. In addition, I am now a Catholic grandfather and I want my grandchildren to receive the treasure and beauty of an authentically Catholic education. Finally, I write as a Catholic citizen who after years of service as a lawyer, social activist and public policy advocate is convinced that only the teaching of the Catholic Church has what is needed to set the ship of western civilization aright. Thus, it is not theory to me but lived reality when I affirm with conviction that only through an authentically Catholic education can the next generation be prepared for the mission of the Church.

Finally, in an age seemingly intoxicated on "rights talk", it is important to note that our children deserve a fully Catholic Education. The first right is the right to receive the truth. After all, the children in our Catholic schools are not ours. They belong to the Lord. We gave them back to Him and to His Church at the font of Baptism. The future and the culture cry out for a new generation of Catholic men and women who understand the implications of their faith on the entirety of their lives and are motivated by their faith to take their place within every segment of

society and build. These kinds of men and women do not appear on the scene through happenstance; they must be properly educated and then enlisted in the mission of the Church.

The Separation between Faith and Life

The identity crisis in Catholic education is a part of a broader spiritual malady, what the Church has rightly labeled a “separation between faith and life.” There is a disconnect between the faith many Catholics profess and the way they live their daily lives and fulfill their civic duties. This separation is sadly evident in many different areas. If Catholics fully understood the implications of their faith upon their whole life, Western culture would simply not be in the current shape it is in. This separation was addressed by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in their document on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*):

“This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation. Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.”

Before Antioch where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians, they were often referred to as “The Way”. Their lifestyle was different from the lifestyle of many in the then prevailing culture. Their faith informed how they actually lived their daily lives. To belong to Jesus Christ and to His Church worked its way into the every aspect of their lives, individually and collectively. Their commitment to a lived, vibrant and integrated Christian faith drew them together, not just for worship and mutual support, but because they understood their mission. It still should among all who bear the name Christian in our own day. This is particularly true of Catholics. If the fullness of Christianity is found within the Catholic Church, that gives us the highest obligation, among all Christians, to live this way. The current deficiencies and problems evident in Catholic education are only one more bad fruit of this “separation between faith and life.”

Education is not something the Church adds something to, as though the process of educating were some kind of nakedly secular pursuit which we somehow make “religious”. Rather, education is the very heart and core of the Churches’ mission. In his masterful letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul calls all Christians to a “...renewal of their minds”. (Romans 12:2) This renewal of the mind is the essence of Catholic education. In speaking of herself, the Church often notes that she is an “expert in humanity” who “walks the way of the person”. In words of Pope John XXIII which are echoed in so many pronouncements of the Magisterium, The Church is, both “Mater et Magister” “Mother and Teacher.” She is herself an educating institution.

Restoring the full understanding of the nature and implications of Catholic identity – and the building of a Catholic culture within our Catholic Schools – will not be accomplished by simply adding on programs or celebrating as though it already exists when, at least in some places, it simply does not. It will not automatically appear because we use the name Catholic in our name or on our brochures. Catholic Identity in an institution, just as in persons, begins from the inside and works its way throughout like leaven or yeast. Catholic identity must be the very heart and core of a Catholic school, providing the infrastructure for the entire educational mission.

In 1997, the Congregation for Catholic Education, the Vatican Congregation charged with ensuring that Catholic educational institutions are worthy of bearing that august name, summarized the Purpose, Identity and Mission of the Catholic School with crystal clarity in its seminal document entitled “The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium.” The following words are taken from a subsection of that work entitled “Catholic Schools at the Heart of the Church”:

“It is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its original characteristics and its “structure” as a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry. The Catholic school participates in the evangelizing mission of the Church and is the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out. In this way “Catholic schools are at once places of evangelization, of complete formation, of enculturation, of apprenticeship in a lively dialogue between young people of different religions and social backgrounds....

The ecclesial nature of the Catholic school, therefore, is written in the very heart of its identity as a teaching institution. It is a true and proper ecclesial entity by reason of its educational activity, “in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony”. Thus it must be strongly emphasized that this ecclesial dimension is not a mere adjunct, but is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive characteristic which penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity, a fundamental part of its very identity and the focus of its mission. The fostering of this dimension should be the aim of all those who make up the educating community.

By reason of its identity, therefore, the Catholic school is a place of ecclesial experience, which is molded in the Christian community. However, it should not be forgotten that the school fulfils its vocation to be a genuine experience of Church only if it takes its stand within the organic pastoral work of the Christian community. In a very special way the Catholic school affords the opportunity to meet young people in an environment which favors their Christian formation. Unfortunately, there are instances in which the Catholic school is not perceived as an integral part of organic pastoral work, at times it is considered alien, or very nearly so, to the community.”

The use of the expression “Heart of the Church” by the Congregation was intentional. Seven years earlier, the Servant of God John Paul II, had released his apostolic letter entitled “At the Heart of the Church” (Ex Corde Ecclesia) affirming the same educational mission in addressing the mission of Catholic Colleges and Universities. In that letter he wrote:

“Since the objective of a Catholic University is to assure in an institutional manner a Christian presence in the university world confronting the great problems of society and culture, every Catholic University, as Catholic, must have the following essential characteristics: “1. a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such; 2. a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research; 3. fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;4. an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life”.... In the light of these four characteristics, it is evident that besides the teaching, research and services common to all Universities, a Catholic University, by institutional commitment, brings to its task the inspiration and light of the Christian message. In a Catholic University, therefore, Catholic ideals, attitudes and principles penetrate and inform university activities in accordance with the proper nature and autonomy of these activities. In a word, being both a University and Catholic, it must be both a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge, and an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative”

These two documents are not the only pronouncements on the purpose, identity and mission of Catholic schools. The Catholic Church has spoken clearly, repeatedly and consistently about Catholic education. Though there may be some difference in the application of these principles depending upon the level of the educational institution, the principles remain the same. Unfortunately, it has been my experience that too many leaders of Catholic schools, whether, Principals, headmasters or Presidents are unaware of this treasury of instruction. Perhaps that lack of required knowledge of the teaching of the Church concerning the nature, mission and purpose of Catholic education in the leadership of our Catholic schools is itself the greatest problem. We have all too often adopted a secular model in choosing leaders. Of course we want to ensure competence, indeed excellence; we must first make sure that those who lead Catholic Institutions are themselves properly educated in the faith. The Catholic school is not a private school dressed up in Catholic clothes.

I now turn to several of the most important principles.

The Catholic School must be Catholic

Let me state what should be obvious. The Purpose of a Catholic School is to be a Catholic School. To teach, form and prepare students in Christ, through Christ, and with Christ, who has been raised and continues His redemptive mission through His Body, the Church. In the words of the great Western Bishop Augustine:

“Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself. Do you understand and grasp, brethren, God’s grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ. For if he is the head, we are the members; he and we together are the whole man. . . . The fullness of Christ then is the head and the members. But what does “head and members” mean? Christ and the Church.”

Catholic schools are an extension of the Catholic Church, a cell of the Body of Christ. This living Christ still teaches, and directs His Church. Through that Church he continues to influence all of human culture. The faithful of the Church are called to inculcate and live the truth as articulated in the Holy Spirit by the teaching office of the Church. As we do, the redemptive mission of Jesus continues through us. That mission is nothing less than the reconstitution and recapitulation of all persons, indeed the entire created order in and through the Church. Of course, this is an inter-generational mission and therefore always requires the Catholic education of the next generation. The Church exists to evangelize, catechize and educate until the Lord returns. At the forefront of the mission of the Catholic Church the education of the next generation of Catholic men and women.

Catholic Identity is not a hat or coat to be put on in some classes and taken off in others. Nor is it to be worn simply when we bring the children to Mass during the school day only to be forgotten and deemed irrelevant when a faculty tackles curriculum development! The Catholic School derives its very reason for existence, its identity, by living in the Heart of the Church. It finds its missionary assignment only when it sees its placement within the Ark of the Church. Thus, like the Church of which she is an extension, the Catholic school shares in the mission of Jesus Christ. This is a challenge which every generation must accept. Every institution which bears the name Catholic participates in this mission and must find its own specific mission under its maternal shadow, the Catholic school must be of, with and for the church because her purpose, identity and mission proceeds from the Communion of the Church.

This self-understanding will not be discovered by accident. It requires continual review and that is one of the primary tasks of leadership. The development of curriculum at a Catholic School must be led by the Principal or headmaster or president who works with his or her faculty. It is not a matter of simply adding “religious notions” on to a secular curriculum. Forming students with a Catholic world view is not a “part” of the curriculum it is the heart of the curriculum. Faith is not simply taught in religion or theology class. Rather, Catholic identity must be the hermeneutic, the lens, through which the entire educational mission is viewed. It should structure the framework for all curriculum development. The Catholic educational mission is to inform and educate the whole student, who is an integrated human person, in the teaching, “the mind” of the Catholic Church, thus preparing men and women with a profoundly Catholic Vision of life. Only by doing this will the Catholic school fulfill its vital mission.

In the words of the Congregation for Catholic education: “The Catholic school is committed thus to the development of the whole man, since in Christ, the Perfect Man, all human values find their fulfillment and unity. Herein lies the specifically Catholic character of the school. Its duty to cultivate human values in their own legitimate right in accordance with its particular mission to serve all men has its origin in the figure of Christ. He is the One Who ennoble man, gives meaning to human life, and is the Model which the Catholic school offers to its pupils.” All Subjects and all activities in a Catholic School should be imbued with this anthropology and the derivative understanding of education it entails. Catholic education exists to put students in touch with the source of all Truth and Beauty, God. We should teach that Science, though certainly pursuing and utilizing all available methods for scientific inquiry is to be at the service of truth, the person, the family and the common good. We should teach our students that Math is a language with which we are enabled to plumb the depth and beauty of God’s creation and through it participate in His continuing creation.

We should teach our students the joy of reading by introducing them to the masters, the great classics of Western Civilization. We should expose them to the rich tapestry of art which is found in the heart of the Church. It is the Church which has birthed some of the greatest artists in human history precisely because she proclaims that God is the Divine artist. It can once again! Our libraries should be filled with books which reflect the best of Civilization. Sadly, my experience on that front has been among the most disappointing in the Catholic school. Too many shelves are filled with the contemporary equivalent of what we used to refer to as “dime store novels”. They cheapen love and life by imparting some of the worst aspects of the degradation and utilitarianism endemic to Western culture. These young men and women given to our care deserve so much more. Students at Catholic Schools should not just read about Aristotle, or Plato, or Saint Thomas Aquinas but they should actually read these great teachers who formed the very Foundation of Western Civilization! After all, if we hope to halt the demise of Western Civilization, we must get equip these young men and women so they can pick up the trowel and rebuild! We must give them not only the tools but the building materials. We need to stretch our students academically and not promote a kind of minimalism. We underestimate the potential of too many. In an authentically Catholic educational philosophy there is no dichotomy between “faith and reason” or faith and intellectual excellence. In one of the great encyclical letters of the late Servant of God John Paul II *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason) he expressed it so clearly: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.” This kind of all embracing, integrated educational vision and mission can only be worked into the mission and lived experience of an academic community by the kinds of Catholic leaders, be they Principals, headmasters, or Presidents, who themselves believe it, and live it. In the oft quoted line of Groucho Marx “Sincerity is the hardest thing to fake”. Catholic identity lived and understood must become the first criteria we look for in choosing leaders for Catholic Schools at every educational level. This kind of Catholic vision cannot be parroted or pretended. It must also be the driving inspiration in the lives and hearts of the Leaders of Catholic Schools. It should motivate their service, and inform everything that they do in discharging their office!

The leader of any Catholic educational institution must realize that their service is to the Catholic Church and then through her for the world. They must clearly understand the implications of the faith on the entirety of the educational mission. They are not simply secular professionals offering their skills in a Catholic school. As with leadership of any Catholic institution, they now participate in the saving mission of the Catholic Church. They must be properly formed and up to this kind of task. The students entrusted to their care are “living stones being built into a spiritual household” (1 Peter 2:5) who have been called to build the future. Their call as leaders is to be able to articulate a compelling vision and mission in word and deed and help the academic community placed in their care along the Catholic way. Thus, they must understand their faith and be able to help others charged with the educational mission to do the same.

The Catholic School Should Prepare Saints

In the “Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium” the Congregation for Catholic education spoke to the totality of the educational enterprise by grounding it in the centrality of Jesus Christ. In so doing they also made it exceedingly clear what makes a school Catholic: “...Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school. His revelation gives new meaning to life and helps man to direct his thought, action and will according to the Gospel, making the beatitudes his norm of life. The fact that in their own individual ways all members of the school community share this Christian vision makes the school “Catholic”; principles of the Gospel in this manner become the educational norms since the school then has them as its internal motivation and final goal.... Being aware that Baptism by itself does not make a Christian – living and acting in conformity with the Gospel is necessary – the Catholic school tries to create within its walls a climate in which the pupil’s faith will gradually mature and enable him to assume the responsibility placed on him by Baptism. It will give pride of place in the education it provides through Christian Doctrine to the gradual formation of conscience in fundamental, permanent virtues – above all the theological virtues, and charity in particular, which is, so to speak, the life-giving spirit which transforms a man of virtue into a man of Christ. Christ, therefore, is the teaching-centre, the Model on Whom the Christian shapes his life. In Him the Catholic school differs from all others which limit themselves to forming men. Its task is to form Christian men, and, by its teaching and witness, show non-Christians something of

the mystery of Christ who surpasses all human understanding....” I recently proposed a new motto for the local parish school at which I serve while I also serve as a parish deacon and continue work toward a PhD in Moral theology. I told those in leadership of the school that I felt that they could help to incarnate this kind of “gradual formation of conscience in fundamental, permanent virtues” which the Congregation for Catholic education addressed through the adoption of a new motto. I also proposed that they develop a new mission statement around it. The motto I proposed was “Fidelity, Virtue and Excellence.” Sadly, over the last few years this school followed a trend that is all too prevalent in some Catholic Schools. It downplayed its Catholic identity in both its mission statement and promotional material. As a result of this (as well as for other reasons) I believe that it has begun to lose its Catholic identity and distinctiveness.

Saying this has not made me popular among some. Others have welcomed my efforts. Let’s be honest, the external signs of a Catholic school alone will not ensure the continuation of a robust Catholic identity. For example, in what I believe was a misguided approach at ecumenical sensitivity (discussed below) and through an unfortunate series of internal struggles, this particular school has, at least in my opinion, approached its Catholic identity in an outside in fashion. Treating it more like a coat to be put on as discussed above. The current mission statement and brochure do not really distinguish this school as Catholic. I will address the three components of this proposed motto in light of my broader topic, the nature, purpose and identity of a Catholic School.

Fidelity

The Catholic school must be Catholic, communicating the Catholic faith- a full, sacramental and ecclesial Christian Faith that pledges Fidelity to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. At the University level, the apostolic letter “At the Heart of the Church” requested that all Theology Professors at Catholic Colleges and Universities sign a “Mandatum” acknowledging their full acceptance of Catholic teaching and submission to the teaching office of the Church. I propose that it is time to ensure that those who teach theology at all Catholic schools, on every level, similarly pledge their fidelity to the Teaching Office of the Church. After all, those who teach younger men and women have an even greater responsibility to ensure that they are really teaching what the Church teaches. In addition, those who lead our Catholic Schools should demonstrate that they truly understand the Catholic faith and are living by it. Only then can they be truly capable of leading a Catholic institution.

Virtue

I am personally tired, and a bit suspicious, of all the “values” talk in our Catholic schools as well as in the broader culture. A professor of mine recently noted that “values talk” is like a Trojan horse, you do not know what is sneaking in with it. In some instances, the word “values” is being co-opted and used to promote any number of agendas. Some of these “values” are actually in conflict with the Catholic faith. When hearing “values talk” a Catholic leader should ask “whose values?” True Catholic education is about more than “values.” Catholic Education is about Christian Virtue; the Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Love, which are infused in our children at their Baptism, along with the Cardinal virtues which they are called to cultivate through living lives of holiness, participating in the Sacraments, growing in their faith through Prayer and living a Eucharistic life of service and love. If we truly hope to teach our children about Christian Virtue, we must demonstrate it in our own lives. That is how we will ensure that Virtues are both caught and taught in our Catholic Schools.

Excellence

In using this word I mean much more than the sheer secular sense of technical excellence – though most certainly we must be excellent in that sense as well. Rather, I believe that we must recover its use in the classical sense. The purpose of a Catholic school is to educate children for a life of excellence and Beatitude. We must teach students in our schools that they are called into a world which God still loves so much that he still sends His only Son, through them, as His image-bearers. We need to help them to fall in love with the Lord and with His Church. We should help them to grasp the reality that through their Baptism they were reborn into the Church and are now called to consecrate the whole of human life to God; to love their fellow man with the redemptive love of Jesus and to be stewards of their God-given tasks for the common good.

In my own Diocese there has been an emphasis placed on developing what is called a “consensus curriculum.” The approach has not always produced excellence. Sadly, it has also led to a form of minimalism. Excellence is about more than a compliance with minimum standards. It presumes a truly Catholic epistemology and pedagogy. True education is so much deeper than what is being promoted in some Catholic schools. The mission of the Catholic School is to educate and form saints who can actually transform the world of the Third Millennium in, with, for and through the Church.

This kind of excellence takes an excellent leader; one who understands that the leadership of a Catholic school is a sacred trust requiring both knowledge of – and fidelity to – the fullness of Catholic teaching. These kinds of leaders will teach, live and promote a virtue based educational philosophy and lead the entire Catholic educational community, faculty, staff and students, to the source of all Virtue and Excellence, Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of St. Mark, following the account of the healing of the deaf man, we read that the crowd was amazed at Jesus. They said: “He has done all things well” (Mark 7:37) In the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ we witness the model of this kind of excellence.

This call to excellence is developed brilliantly in one of the most often quoted sections of the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes* 22):

“The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown. He who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), is Himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam He restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin.”

The sacred humanity of Jesus Christ is the model for all who are baptized. We are called to continual conversion and transformation. Do we incorporate this anthropological understanding into our teaching? Do our Catholic school leaders understand the philosophy of education and the call to Christian humanism that flows from this truth? Through the Paschal mystery we have been capacitated, with the help of the grace mediated through the sacraments and our participation in the mystery that is the communion of the Church, to live as Jesus lived. We are invited into a life of continual conversion where we grow in Virtue and learn to “do all things well”. The purpose, mission and identity of a Catholic School are to bring about the conversion, education and formation of students as whole Persons into the Image of Jesus Christ. If we are serious about forming and building Catholic schools animated by this kind of vision, there is much work to be done. We will also encounter misunderstanding and opposition.

The Catholic School is Prophetic

We should not be surprised when we face opposition in trying to ensure that Catholic schools are Catholic. This is the history of the Church. She has a prophetic ministry. People, even from within, have opposed the Church when she has unapologetically proclaimed the fullness of the faith in word and deed. If the Catholic school participates in the mission of the Church then it also shares in this prophetic role. In our work in Catholic education we need to hear regularly the words with which the great Servant of God John Paul II began his extraordinarily fruitful and prophetic pontificate “Be Not Afraid”, the very same words spoken by the Angel to the Blessed Virgin. Some will not understand us when we challenge some approaches to education in our current Catholic school system. They may be offended by our zeal or threatened by our resolve.

They may question our “credentials” or hide behind various kinds of feigned “expertise”. For too long, we have let the education of our children be taken over by self-professed experts who have borrowed more from secular sources than from the well spring of the wisdom of the Tradition of the Church. This is nowhere more evident than in the current “cult of experts” floating around some Chancery offices. I practiced law for twenty seven years. I also served as a political “consultant”. I understand the proper role of experts and consultants and believe that they can and should be used in many circumstances. However, there was an old joke among Trial lawyers when I was one: “You can tell an expert the moment he or she walks into Court. They are the ones with the expensive briefcase from out of town.” In other words, the entire use of “experts” and “consultants” can, and sometimes is, a waste, an exercise in futility.

I have read some of the consultant’s recommendations that have been offered in reports to some of the Chancery offices sincerely seeking to “fix” broken Catholic schools. Sadly, they sometimes seem to use the same boilerplate secular solutions and change the name of the Diocese. They also seem to not deal well with foundational issues such as Catholic identity. If they do address it, they make it a category which they bring up throughout their report, sprinkling the phrase liberally as if to add religious sounding seasoning to the recipe. Then, they add to their reports selected quotes from Church documents in a manner that sometimes appears to be an effort to make the report and its recommendations sound “Catholic” by a version of proof – texting with quotes from Church pronouncements in order to borrow authority.

Another form of opposition directed against those who question whether Catholic identity is really being fostered in our schools is the use of a version of the old “guilt by association” technique. I have seen it operate all too often. People who raise questions are painted with the brush of being “pre-Vatican II” (which is used as a disparaging term) when in reality is quite to the contrary! The movement afoot to recover Catholic identity is often being led by young Catholic parents who want to ensure that Catholic Schools are truly Catholic. It is a work of the Holy Spirit. They see it as the fulfillment of their duty as the first teachers of their children. Theologically it is not “pre-Vatican II” but actually reflects the true teaching of the Second Vatican Council rightly understood and properly applied. Addressing and Evaluating the Purpose, Identity and Mission of a Catholic School is precisely what Catholic Parents should be doing. There is a growing crescendo of voices calling for a recovery of the purpose, identity and mission of Catholic Schools as being first Catholic. The effort is not about anyone wanting to “turn the clock back” to some perceived age past. Rather it is to secure the future.

A Note on Ecumenism

I serve a school that has in its “mission statement” the following words “We promote an ecumenical Christian spirit by welcoming diversity of culture, ability and faith.” Certainly the words were well intended. However, when accompanied by the dropping of the word Catholic from the name of the school (fortunately it was recently reinserted) such language actually reflected a seriously flawed understanding of both authentic ecumenism and the Catholic identity of a Catholic school. First, let me emphasize that I have spent thirty years in ecumenical work in the arenas of evangelization, ‘spiritual’ ecumenism and social justice. I believe in authentic ecumenical

cooperation. I have literally “written books” concerning the subject. However, the ecumenical mission of a Catholic school must flow, as does any true ecumenism in the Church, from its Catholic Identity and must never replace it!

Catholic schools should be ecumenical precisely because they are Catholic. The Catholic Church is not just “one tradition among many” nor is the Catholic Church a “denomination”. Yet, sadly, the lack of theological understanding in too many circles, including in the leadership of some Catholic schools, uses such language and proposes inauthentic models of ecumenism which border on the very “false irenicism” the Second Vatican Council warned of in its excellent Decree on Ecumenism. Catholics believe that the Catholic Church is the Church of Jesus Christ. We believe that there is One Church, and all baptized Christians are in some form of limited communion with that Church. This Church is the Catholic Church wherein the fullness of truth subsists. That is why we do not re-Baptize our Christian friends who come into full communion with the Catholic Church from other Christian traditions or denominations.

Yes we respect, love and we welcome other Christians, other people of faith, indeed all people of good will into our Catholic Schools. But we must not water down who we are. The parents of these children have chosen a Catholic School for their children. We need to give them one. This assertion is about an authentically Catholic ecclesiology. It is not a form of triumphalism. It reflects a living Catholic heart which beats with the Heart of the Lord whose prayer “May They Be One” (John 17:21) will one day be answered.

The Catholic School is an Extension of the First School

Another major problem can emerge in efforts to make and keep Catholic Schools Catholic when the leaders of Catholic schools and Diocesan offices charged with Catholic educational concerns forget who they work for. Too often they can demonstrate a misunderstanding – or in some instances disrespect – of the role of parents as the first teachers of their children and reality that the baptized Christian family is a “domestic church”. The teaching of the Catholic Church on the primacy of parents in the education of their children is fundamental. Yet, there sometimes creeps into certain Catholic circles a suspicion of parents when they question the leaders of Catholic schools or Diocesan leaders. Among the magisterial documents reaffirming the primacy of parents is the Apostolic Exhortation “The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World” by the Servant of God John Paul II where he wrote:

“...the mission to educate (of parents is rooted)... in their participation in God’s creating activity...So great and splendid is the educational ministry of Christian parents that Saint Thomas has no hesitation in comparing it with the ministry of priests: ‘Some only propagate and guard spiritual life by a spiritual ministry: this is the role of the Sacrament of Orders; others do this for both corporal and spiritual life, and this is brought about by the Sacrament of Marriage, by which a man and a woman join in order to beget offspring and bring them up to worship God.’ ”
“The right and duty of parents to give education is essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, on account of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; it is irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others.”

Any effort to usurp the primary role of parents as the first teachers is a grave matter and must be exposed and opposed. If we want parents to choose to send their children to our Catholic Schools they must be convinced that they are fully and meaningfully Catholic. They should always be seen as a resource and not a problem. We must presume good faith and fidelity to their vocation as the primary educators of their children when they call upon Catholic educators to prove they are doing their job well. They are the ones who are responsible for the first Catholic School, the domestic church of the family and we should sit up and take notice when they speak! The Leaders of the Catholic School, including teachers, work for the family, with the family, and must never, directly or passively work against it.

Another example of this same problem can be revealed in how some Catholic educational officials perceive the growing number of “home schooling” Catholic families. I have witnessed a kind of arrogance among some

educators and Chancery Bureaucrats concerning the competency of home school parents. For example, I attended a function at the beginning of the school year where one official actually proposed that home school parents should take some kind of test, given by the Diocesan Office of Christian formation, to ensure that they should even be teaching their children the Catholic faith. I was astounded and let it be known!

In his "Letter to Families", the Servant of God John Paul II wrote the following:

"Parents are the first and most important educators of their own children, and they also possess a fundamental competence in this area; they are educators because they are parents. They share their educational mission with other individuals or institutions, such as the Church and the State. But the mission of education must always be carried out in accordance with a proper application of the Principle of Subsidiarity. This implies the legitimacy and indeed the need of giving assistance to the parents, but finds its intrinsic and absolute limit in their prevailing right and actual capabilities. The principle of subsidiarity is thus at the service of parental love, meeting the good of the family unit. For parents by themselves are not capable of satisfying every requirement of the whole process of raising children. Especially in matters concerning their schooling and the entire gamut of socialization. Subsidiarity thus complements paternal and maternal love and confirms its fundamental nature, inasmuch as all other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities in the name of the parents, with their consent and, to a certain degree, with their authorization."

I respect Home Schooling parents. In the course of my legal career I tried to help them at times. However, my wife and I did not choose that option for any of our five children. Yet, I know that home schooling parents are a gift and a resource for the Church. I also know that some would choose Catholic schools if they demonstrated a true Catholic identity.

Conclusion

Above all, I believe that building a dynamically Catholic School for the twenty first century absolutely requires a clear vision, mission and leadership. The leaders of Catholic schools must be able to articulate this mission and vision in a way that inspires the entire academic and parish community to join together in a singular educational missionary purpose. I have seen how those two indispensable requirements, vision and leadership; can be used by the Lord to transform a Catholic School. Let me end by sharing a part of my personal experience. The full story can be found in several books.

As a young man, after almost two years in a Benedictine monastery, I finished my College education in a little College in Ohio. I followed a priest friend there. He had been invited to save the school from impending disaster through becoming its President. It was already morally and spiritually bankrupt and would soon be financially so. He prayed intensely about the invitation and offered to accept upon a condition. The Board had to give him freedom to rededicate the school as a Catholic school to Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life with full adherence to the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church. The Trustees agreed.

When I arrived at this College, three of the four dormitories on campus were empty. The theology major had been cancelled for lack of interest and there was talk of discontinuing daily Mass due to lack of attendance. I moved into an empty dorm and led one of the first "faith households", the nucleus of a new model of student life implemented as a part of the extraordinary vision of this Catholic educational leader. Students were to live a common Christian life in the wing of a dorm. The pattern of their life included attending Mass, studying the faith together, engaging in mission and recreation and supporting one another in order to live full Catholic lives within a College environment. The following year I married my wonderful wife of now thirty two years within the emerging lay Catholic community growing up around this campus and moved off campus. However, I stayed deeply involved in the entire project.

I finished my undergraduate work in Philosophy. By the time I was ready to graduate I had as many theology credits (reflecting what has become a lifelong interest) as I did Philosophy. The administration had properly

reinstated the Theology major at the insistence of my friend, the President. So, I graduated with a double major in Theology and Philosophy. I also witnessed the dorms fill, along with the Chapel. I went to Law school nearby at the University of Pittsburgh in order to stay involved with this amazing work in progress, the recovery of a Catholic College through returning it to an authentic Catholic identity. I stayed involved for sixteen years serving in many capacities including Dean of Students and the Dean of Evangelization. It was a privilege to work alongside of such a truly gifted and visionary Catholic leader.

That wonderful little College became the Franciscan University of Steubenville. Under the leadership of Fr. Michael Scanlan, the College of Steubenville was built into a dynamically orthodox global Catholic University. Now it is only one of many jewels in the growing Crown that is the recovery of Catholic higher education. I learned a lot in those early Steubenville years. As the decades have past I have come to discover that the principles that were applied there are transferable to many organizational contexts. I believe they are applicable to the task of recovering and building Catholic schools at every level of Catholic education and within the full legitimate diversity of the beauty that is the Catholic Church.

What happened at Steubenville is not an isolated story. It is happening in other Catholic Colleges. It is happening in Catholic primary, secondary and high schools. It is happening in parish schools, and it is happening in the burgeoning new world of private lay run Catholic academies.

It can also happen for the entire Catholic educational system. It begins, grows and flourishes within rediscovering the fullness of Catholic identity.

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